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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a conceptual analysis of bias and outlines the complexity and subtlety of the questions engulfing bias by sorting out views of bias that have been implicit in debates about the media, assessing the scientific value of these competing views in identifying and understanding bias in the media, offering an alternative view which is more useful in scientific investigation, suggesting where and under what conditions bias might be likely to occur in the mass media, providing some analytic concerns of news reports using the conceptual and theoretical framework that is developed, and suggesting some implications and consequences that politically biased media may hold for American society. Much of the analysis, intended to represent results which are general, concerns bias in television news coverage, although other media are mentioned as appropriate. A list of references is included. (JM)

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SOME CONCERNS IN EVALUATING NEWS COVERAGE:

THE CASE OF BIASED REPORTING OF POLITICAL EVENTS

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Some Concerns in Evaluating News Coverage:

The Case of Biased Reporting of Political Events*

I. Introduction

In several speeches not long after the conclusion of the 1968 presidential campaign, former Vice-President Agnew unleashed a sensational debate. He charged network television news programming with reflecting the views of an effete, snobbish, liberal, New York-Washington elite which played the role of "nattering nabobs of negativism" in reporting news concerning American society and politics.

The Agnew speeches served to focus criticism on network news, but it is unlikely that the attacks on the news media created a ground of opinion that was hostile to network news in the minds of very many Americans. Many people, for one thing, maintain a modicum of distrust that is directed at a variety of sources of information (Roper, 1969). The speeches apparently did sensitize both the public and social scientists to the question of biased news reporting about social and political events. And although substantial tension has waxed and waned from time to time between the press and government in America since pre-revolutionary days, a resurgence of public hostilities between the major networks and the Nixon White House became evident (White, 1973). Further exacerbations in the conflict have emerged since the demise of Agnew and Nixon.

*This research owes a great deal to many people. Jorgen Westerstahl, Howard Penniman, Charles S. Hyneman, and Lyle Nelson contributed in particularly important ways. Work was supported by a research contract to the senior author from American Enterprise Institute. Critical comments by anonymous referees also lead to improvements in this paper.

A commonsensical notion of political bias lies at the heart of the controversy. With few exceptions, officials feel that too much is said about them that is critical and too little is said about them that is favorable. The news is unfair. The public becomes enjoined in this debate as co-partisans. Republicans are more likely to sympathize with political compatriots than with Democratic complainants. Democratic partisans behave in a similar way.

But little more than polemics has emerged from the debate. Our view is that the role of the mass media in a democratic society is much too important to relegate policy-relevant issues concerning the diffusion of information about public affairs to polemicists. This paper presents a conceptual analysis of bias. The analysis, hopefully, will serve as a basis for a less polemical application of social science to a set of important policy questions.

The purpose of this study is to outline the complexity and subtlety of the entire range of questions that have engulfed the bias issue by:

1) Sorting out views of bias that have been implicit in debates about the media.
2) Assessing the scientific value of these competing views in identifying and understanding bias in the media.
3) Offering an alternative view which is more useful in scientific investigation.
4) Suggesting where and under what conditions bias might be likely to occur in the mass media.
5) Providing some analytic concerns of news reports using the conceptual and theoretical framework that is developed.
6) Suggesting some implications and consequences that politically biased media may hold for American society.

In order to focus analysis, much of the decision concerns the question of bias in television news coverage; other media are mentioned as appropriate. The conceputal analysis of bias, even though primarily concerned with television, provides a basis for understanding the question of bias regardless of the medium being considered. The analysis is intended to represent results which are general.

II. Alternative Concepts of Bias in News Reporting

Political bias, according to at least one commonsensical view, defines bias as a kind of "slanted" presentation of news that does not portray the world as it really is. But there are many ways in which slanting may occur.

Bias as Lying

Bias has been used to mean lack of truthfulness in reporting news. Charges of bias in this sense usually eminate from a disagreement on the facts of what really occurred in a given situation. The newsman says that "X" occurred, and the viewer argues that "not X" but something else really occurred. For this sense of bias to have meaning, it must be possible to establish either: 1) that something inconsistent with "X" really occurred and that the reporter knew it (the reporter knew that the event occurred in a way that was different than what he had said); or 2) that the news reporter purposely told untruths about events, including about the event involving "X". Although infrequent, Sandman, et al., (1972) conclude that lying has occurred in news reporting.

Some types of propaganda (not all types, for some analysts argue that selected aspects of the truth are superior to untruths in propaganda) assume this form. War propaganda may provide yet other examples of lying. When a war-torn country is told that the enemy is in retreat, when in fact the enemy is advancing, obviously false information has been given (Lerner, 1971; Lasswell, 1971).

Bias As Distortion

A view of bias that is closely related to the preceding notion concerns the collection, aggregation and diffusion of facts so that a distortion of the truth occurs. Few if any outright falsehoods need be included in an account of an event in order to create a false impression of what has actually transpired. Rather, some facts are selected and others omitted in order to mislead. Although the normative implications of lying and distortion are the same, the processes are different. Processing of information, according to this view, is intended to manipulate public response to a specific event or issue.

Charges of bias in this sense stem from disagreement in interpretation of which facts are relevant and how individual facts combine to form an overall conclusion about a story or event. Once again it would appear necessary to establish that: 1) another set of facts and linkages between them provides a more adequate overall interpretation of event "X", and that this new interpretation more accurately accords with reality; or 2) the news reporter consciously chooses a set of facts that he had reason to believe would lead observers to false conclusions about an event, "X".

Charges that network news production is dominated by "eastern establishment liberal-left" or, alternatively, by "Wall Street financiers," or by the "military industrial complex" may imply that distortion of the above type occurs on a regular basis. Reporters choose themes, interpretations and topics to emphasize a very limited set of viewpoints. These viewpoints correspond to the traditional interests of the liberal establishment or of the financial interests in ways that suggest manipulation of information in order to aggrandize private interests. Critics assume that manipulation of information produces distorted results that are systematically favorable to one side and unfavorable to the other side in important controversies (Lefever, 1974).

Bias as Disagreement

Yet another view of bias asserts that the "wrong" values and beliefs are being represented by news and news reporters. This notion involves disagreement about the adequacy and desirability of specific values and beliefs. News programming expresses values and beliefs that an observer disagrees with and dislikes (Cirino, 1971; Efron, 1971). It is necessary only for perceptions of disagreement above value ends to exist in order for this view of bias to be exemplified.

Bias in the sense of disagreement frequently overlaps with the view that elites purposively distort news coverage for their own ends. The overlap occurs if one dislikes or strongly disagrees with the perceived ends in question. Even more common is the reaction that the news is biased because it promotes opposition to some value that one himself holds dear. If one is a Republican and the news shows something favorable about McGovern, or if one is a Democrat and the news shows something favorable about Nixon, then the news is obviously biased.

The Value of These Views of Bias

The preceding three views of bias are of limited usefulness in assessing bias in news reporting in a systematic way. Each view, however, accords with notions of bias that are frequently mentioned, and that enter into policy debates concerning news.

First, it is usually not feasible to check out facts surrounding news stories in a way that is independent of the media. The resources are rarely available even if time permits an analyst to check many (indeed, most) news stories. If, for instance, one assumes that all media contain similar biases in the truth, then one mode of judging one medium's veracity (by comparing its

output with that of other media) is eliminated. Cross-checking specific facts reported by one medium against facts reported by another medium makes little sense if the media all have similar biases. The assumption that some forms of bias are relatively independent in different media (or in different sectors of the same medium) would also appear to be necessary to enable scientific analysis to proceed. Thus, kinds of biases that are assumed to be common to all media can only be studied with great difficulty (Weaver, 1972: 73-74).

Second, it is likely that incentives to avoid misrepresenting facts in the world of news reporting are strong enough so that untruths rarely result, although lapses in truthfulness have been noted (Sandman et al., 1972: 88-93). Truthfulness ranks highly among journalists' professional values, and many journalists see themselves as a vanguard against deceitfulness in political and social life. They therefore might be presumed to take this public responsibility very seriously indeed (Weaver, 1972: 69-69).

Outright lies are rarely worth the price of exposure. Humiliation and unemployment would almost certainly result if lies about an event in news reports were discerned. The benefits and costs of truthfulness usually outweigh the benefits and costs of lying. Indeed, it is rare when one hears that a journalist employed by a major news medium has lied about any event. And when lying becomes publicly known, punitive measures are certain and quick among reputable news media.

Bias according to the third view--as disagreement with values and beliefs that are personally held--is of even less use in analysis. Who is to determine which values and beliefs are correct in an ultimate sense? In the absence of additional information, it would appear that one set of values and beliefs is as good as another. But in a pluralistic, complex society we should expect to

find considerable disagreement about personal values and beliefs reflected in the media. Indeed, if such diversity were not present, we might have cause to raise serious questions about distortion in the news or collusion among news personnel.

There is another side to disagreement over values and beliefs that we must expect to enter the popular arena of debate very frequently, especially in American politics. Whenever one political agent is attacked, charges of bias are likely to be present: the attacker and attacked disagree about values and beliefs at the very minimum. It is obvious from any incumbent's vantage point, for instance, that an electoral challenger is biased because he holds faulty values and incorrect beliefs. Otherwise he would not be a challenger. So, too, media that take positions which coincide with positions taken by the challenger are also biased. And media that broadcast accounts of values and beliefs which coincide with positions taken by the incumbent must therefore also be biased, at least so far as the challenger is concerned.

Thus, bias in terms of simple disagreement above values and beliefs is not useful for scientific purposes in news analysis. Standards of judgment are missing and one is left with matters of personal preference. One suspects that allegations of bias in this sense are fairly often functions of striving for political advantage. Charges and countercharges may be useful to furthering a quest for influence.

Bias in terms of presenting facts so that distorted conclusions follow may be amenable to analysis and may occur with some frequency. We can expect to find this type of reporting among political extremists who function as propagandists and who believe that ultimate ends justify dubious means. "Big lies" are ususally constructed of "little lies" and of carefully chosen "little truths," all of which combine to form major untruths (Lerner, 1971).

Yet, one would not expect distortion to appear frequently in major news media. Many of the same constraints that militate against outright lying would be operative if conscious distortion were involved. It may be that the costs and benefits of distortion are viewed differently by certain kinds of journalists in special situations. Writers of sensationalistic tabloids and expose sheets writing about scandal, almost certainly evaluate distortion from a different perspective than news reporters attempting to describe a political campaign in an objective way. It may even be that distortion is perceived as justified by some muckrakers. Yet, one would not expect journalists who favor distortion to be employed by major news media, such as television network news organizations, the wire services, or major newspapers.

Several Studies of Bias in News Reporting

The role of the social scientists is to try to clarify conceptual meanings, place concepts with "purified" meanings in theories and test hypotheses that eminate from these theories so that scientifically respectable conclusions may be drawn about a subject. Commonsensical approaches to the study of bias may confuse rather than clarify. In the case of bias, we have a surplus of different, often unrelated, meanings. It is therefore useful to review several studies of bias in news reporting that have been conducted by social scientists.

The most widely known study of bias in the news is reported in a volume by Edith Efron (1971), The News Twisters. It is a study of the equity in network news treatment of Nixon, Humphrey and Wallace during the 1968 presidential election campaign. In this study of the last seven weeks of the campaign, Efron also discusses favorable and unfavorable positions that the networks were perceived as having taken with regard to a series of issues.

Efron counted the number of words in each statement that was classified as being favorable or unfavorable to each candidate or issue. These counts were taken as operational definitions of favorable or unfavorable opinion content in the news. Tallies of the number of words of opinion suggested that the Democratic-Liberal-Left was treated more favorably than were competing views.

Efron (1972) later reindicted network coverage of the 1968 election as well as network attacks on The News Twisters. In this rebuttal of criticism of her earlier study, she suggests that the most important findings in the earlier study are that the networks were: overwhelmingly negative in regard to candidate Nixon; very critical of policies in Vietnam; for black militants and opposed to the white middle class; and evasively silent on questions of violent radicalism.

The networks struck out at The News Twisters beginning the same day that the book went to press, October 11, 1971 (CBS, 1971). CBS released a report that was highly critical of Efron's efforts. It noted that more extensive comments were being prepared by two consultants, Winick (1971) and International Research Associates, Inc. (1972). These comments reviewed some aspects of content analysis methodology and discussed the operational meaning of bias in the news. The most damaging criticism of The News Twisters related to: 1) methodology questions concerning how material was coded; and to 2) substantive questions concerning the breadth or scope of what was and what was not coded. Questions were also raised about why Efron had restricted her analysis to a very limited set of issues.

In particular, issue was taken with the reliability of Efron's coding (independent replicability of coding in this case). Efron had failed to present adequate information concerning the extent to which her categorizations could be repeated by independent coders. In replications, her detractors claimed

that reliability was very poor, while her supporters argued that reliability was adequate.

Critics stated, moreover, that The News Twisters cast a much too narrow net in coding issues. Once again, supporters retorted that the 13 issues studied by Efron (including the presidential candidates, and policy in Vietnam, policy on a bombing halt, Viet Cong, white middle class, liberals, conservatives, the Left, black militants, demonstrators, and violent radicals) were the most important issues in the campaign.

A second study by Lefever, TV and National Defense: An Analysis of CBS News, 1972-1973, deserves more than passing mention because it represents an ambitious attempt to study the way that a major institution, the military, was covered by CBS. Lefever asserted that CBS provided biased coverage of the military because primarily unfavorable aspects were covered, stories lacked comparative depth (especially where Soviet military affairs were involved), and some aspects of military affairs were given but scant attention. The study did not compare CBS military coverage with that of other networks nor with military coverage by other media. Stevenson et al., (1973) concluded that candidates received very similar treatment in CBS election coverage during the latter phases of the 1968 campaign. Using several forms of content analysis, the authors based their conclusions on analysis of printed CBS transcripts. The greatest problem with these studies is that no baseline for evaluating coverage was provided except for notions of "fairness." But more about the baseline problem later. It is central to the problem of evaluating news.

Perhaps the most sophisticated study of bias that has been conducted recently is an analysis of Swedish media coverage of several social and political issues by Westerstahl (1972). Studying both print and television media,

Westerstahl employed the categories of balance, impartiality, factuality (truthfulness), and relevance to investigate the extent to which various group positions and issues were favored in the Swedish news. Like the Efron design, the logic of Westerstahl's analysis was to compare categories on the criterion of bias as selectivity: he was concerned with the extent to which different media covered the same events in distinct ways.

This view of bias is by no means as simple as it appears at first glance. Nor do the ambiguities of other conceptualizations of bias necessarily melt away. In his insightful and innovative discussion, Westerstahl (1973: 12-21) outlined two dimensions of objectivity or the lack of bias: factuality and impartiality. He defines factuality as the selection of aspects of events that are relevant for informing people about the event.

According to Westerstahl, impartiality is a lack of partisanship and neutrality in presentation. Both involve reporting news so that the news agency's own attitudes concerning events and people are not reflected in the report. It is assumed that professional norms place some constraints on what is presented as news, how it is presented and under what conditions it is presented. Thus, indices of relevance, non-partisanship and neutrality are based on comparisons of the way that different media present the same event and the way different events are presented by the same medium. Consistency in news reporting is taken as an indicator of relevance, impartiality and neutrality.

III. Bias as Selectivity: An Alternative View

Bias as Selectivity

Having argued that the three preceding views of bias are of limited usefulness in assessing bias in news reporting in a systematic way, the analysis will consider an alternative view of bias. This alternative view, "partisan bias as

selectivity," which includes an unbalanced and inequitable or unfair treatment of events and people by news reporters and networks, appears to be a far more reasonable vantage point from which to analyze media coverage of candidates, campaigns, and political issues (Westerstahl, 1972).

When news reporters are accused of being biased in this sense, they are being accused of selecting facts to represent a story so that the end results are unfair to the issues and persons concerned. It should be clear that the reporter is not being charged with consciously setting out to choose facts to distort the news, even though the consequences for an audience may be the same. The process is more subtle and the implications far greater than that.

Two considerations must be made in viewing bias as selectivity. First, selectivity is ubiquitous. Any time one abstracts or generalizes he is selecting certain details rather than other details. Second, the ultimate biases involved in selection of some facts rather than other facts is by no means necessarily a conscious process (Graber, 1976: 22-42). Since selectivity must be involved, the crucial questions, as Weaver argues (1972: 73), is how selection occurs and with what consequences. Motives of news reporters, other news personnel, and of the networks are not necessarily relevant to this question.

Selectivity involves choosing facts to report and interrelating the facts in some coherent way. Implicit theories about society guide the selection process. Some facts are chosen and others omitted due to judgments of relevance. And relevance is, in turn, partially determined by journalists' views of the world. The audience, of course, receives a partial reconstruction of events in the news in all cases. But some reconstructions are superior to others because the selection of facts and the recounting of the way they are interrelated are more adequate.

Selectivity also involves choosing to report or to ignore a given story altogether. The news staffs of network television companies are subject to a variety of incentives to report certain types of news: unusual, conflict-laden, dramatic, and esoteric events that are assumed to contribute to viewer interests are reported more often than others. Mundane, matter-of-fact and regular types of events are avoided in most news.

Canons of newsworthiness may contain implicit social and political biases (Epstein, 1975: 78-100). Reports of problems in a campaign organization may give the impression that the candidate is a poor administrator. Emphasis on conflict in covering a press conference may lead audience members to conclude that reporters are purposively baiting an executive. Reconstruction of riots in small sections of an urban community may suggest that an entire city is in flames or that the social order is disintegrating. Yet news stories would be very likely to emphasize conflict because of its assessed newsworthiness in reporting these kinds of events.

It is necessary to assume that some agreement exists within the community of journalists on what is newsworthy and what is not newsworthy in order to discern bias in selection of story topics. Only if we can assume that the range of topics regularly reported by the news covers all newsworthy topics that could reasonably be expected to be reported, would we be in a position to discuss bias by omission. Variation in the range of topics is then idicative of bias by omission.

Selectivity in Two McGovern Stories

The preceding discussion extends a view of selectivity that is no doubt simplistic in comparison to the problems that news personnel often face in producing a story. The following two network news stories about the McGovern

campaign and its relationship to organized labor provide a more realistic example of selection problems. The stories were chosen for illustration because they were convenient, because the stories were about the same event (the Communication Workers' endorsement of McGovern), and because they illustrate some of the more subtle yet probably more pervasive forms of what kinds of information a news staff selects. They were not selected to exemplify a political bias in the sense of being favorable or unfavorable to McGovern, Nixon, or organized labor.

(NBC, August 4, 1972)

> The McGovern campaign continues to pick up Union support the hard way, piece by piece. Today the Communications Workers of America endorsed McGovern and attacked AFL-CIO President George Meany for refusing to back either candidate. The Union said neutrality in a presidential election is the same as endorsing President Nixon's re-election. It was the second major Union to back McGovern.

(ABC, August 4, 1972)

> Calling the Nixon administration almost a re-run of Herbert Hoover, the Executive Board of the Communication Workers of America today broke with AFL-CIO President George Meany and endorsed Senator McGovern. ABC's Herbert Kaplow has a report.
>
> The announcement was made this morning by Union President Joseph Burn who usually goes along with Meany. Burn said McGovern was better for Labor than Nixon.
>
> His point of view is much more close to the point of view of the Communication Workers of America, and for that matter to all of organized labor, than the point of view of Richard Nixon. I really don't know (ah) what would cause anyone in organized labor (ah) to be opposed to George McGovern.
>
> Michael Balzanno is a Nixon aide whose job it is to cultivate labor support, particularly among blue-collar workers.
>
> "There are placed in the country where there are many problems which laborers, blue-collar laborers, feel is important to them. And perhaps the labor leadership doesn't see it quite that way. When they endorse a president one way or the other, it means a lot financially. But to the man in Detroit who's concerned with aid to Catholic education, (ah) an endorsement doesn't mean that much."

> So labor leaders like Joseph Burn can endorse McGovern while the President goes for Labor's rank and file, trying to win their votes by saying the right things on amnesty, busing, law and order, and abortion. Those are the issues the President hopes George McGovern will use to scare away voters, Joe Burn, or no Joe Burn.

Both stories concern the endorsement of the McGovern campaign by the Communication Workers of America. CBS broadcast no story about this endorsement on August 4, although it may have been reported on another day. Note the differences between the two stories in terms of what is selected in each.

The NBC story is very short and to the point, and it contains a very limited amount of information: the campaign is having difficulty obtaining labor support; McGovern received the endorsement because to fail to endorse the Democrat was the same as endorsing President Nixon; and two unions now back McGovern. No further information concerning endorsements is presented.

The ABC story is considerably longer and more complete than the NBC story. The essential information concerning endorsement is given. But contextual information concerning division in labor's ranks is emphasized by the Burn question. Yet additional contextual information is provided by juxtaposing the Balzanno quotation.

Thus, the ABC story "selects in" more information than the shorter NBC story. Yet the ABC story and NBC story do not overlap completely, since NBC points out that two unions support McGovern, while ABC does not include this information. Still, neither story provides a great deal of information. Each involves selection of a few facts about the relationship between McGovern and the Communications Workers. Each story omits a tremendous amount of highly relevant information.

The stories were not chosen to illustrate favorable or unfavorable partisan biases in network news coverage of the McGovern campaign. But the stories do

illustrate some of the more vague and possibly more pervasive biases of a news medium that requires selection of a very limited number of interesting and engaging facts from a much larger group of relevant facts.

It is also important to note that interpretations of the stories with respect to political bias is in part at least contingent on the state of one's political awareness and sensitivity to (politicization) news stories as well as the particular views one has of the political world (Nimmo, 1974). The commonsense theories that we have in our minds may lead us to interpret either or both of these stories as favorable or unfavorable to McGovern or to organized labor or to President Nixon. The stories may, moreover, engage personal emotions and needs that some members of an audience harbor in a variety of ways.

Some Caveats in the Discussion of Bias

Several caveats are in order. First, news may appear to be biased, or partial to one side because the particular problem that is presented has strong implications for values that are deeply ingrained in American culture (White, 1975). Betrayal of public trust, for example, might be presented in a balanced, impartial way. Stories relating to public corruption would probably evoke the medium's hostility in fairly obvious ways. Areas of controversy on which little social consensus exists concerning outcomes probably shade into areas of controversy on which considerable agreement exists on central values. The overlap between these two types of concerns comprises an area of great normative ambiguity. It would appear that to be biased against murder would be appropriate for the popular media, although to be biased against a murder defendent prior to his trial would not be appropriate. Similarly, it would appear appropriate to be baised in opposition to warfare, but inappropriate to present material in a biased way against the Vietnam War (Johnson, 1969; Russo, 1971-1972).

At least part of the controversy concerning bias in news reporting in the United States concerns whose deeply ingrained values are to be promoted (Panitt, 1972). In instances of consensus, such as questions of murder, little difficulty arises. But consider social protests and demonstrations that represent specific interests. Partiality on questions involving less than consensual or near consensual responses may be at the heart of the dispute between the so-called "advocacy" and "objective journalists." In cases of conflict, does one report the viewpoints of the hardhats, or of the protestors, or of the intellectuals or of whom?

Yet another view would argue that the above expresses a more exalted position for the media than what they ought to occupy in a democratic, highly pluralistic society. The media should strive, critics might wish to argue, to present relevant, balanced and impartial accounts of events no matter what the normative characteristics of these events are. Indeed, it should be left to the citizen to decide how descriptive material should engage his values rather than decided by the media in advance. Thus, except for clearly labeled commentary or editorializing that expresses the viewpoint of the media, news programming ought to avoid imbalance and impartiality (Cusack, 1963).

Second, it is dangerous to infer motivation from analyses of manifest content in news presentation. Whether one sees a communist, fascist, Wall Street conspiracy, the tenacles of the military industrial complex or some other kind of plot behind patterns of reporting that appear in the manifest content of news broadcasts, little evidence exists for making assertions about the motives of network personnel. Information appears as a series of statements and images, and is interpreted by audience members independently of the motives of news personnel. Many assumptions must be made about the relationship between

manifest content and motives of reporters, producers, editors, and other network officials in order to infer motivation from news in this way. The argument is highly tenuous at best, since the addition of each weak assumption in a chain of reasoning also adds another plausible alternative expanation (i.e., that the assumption is incorrect). The consequence is to have many alternative explanations with little evidence bearing directly on any of them.

Finally, it is necessary to lay one naive but nonetheless occasionally mentioned criticism of scientific studies of bias to rest before we proceed further. The fact that all news is biased because it involves selectivity does not mean that the selectivity necessarily appears in the same way. Indeed, it is more likely and certainly a great deal easier to assume that bias occurs to differing degrees and about a variety of topics. Such an assertion, moreover, clearly does not suggest that it is meaningless or trite to study questions of bias. Advocates of the position that all is bias and that one therefore cannot study bias in the news in an objective manner call the validity of their own assertion into question no less than those who generalized about human behavior by arguing that a social science was impossible because one cannot generalize about human behavior.

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that bias as a concept is complex and multidimensional. Not all ordinary language uses can be applied in a fruitful manner in a scientific study. At a minimum we have seen that it may mean distortion by purposively choosing certain details of an event in order to create a particular impression in an audience that is unfair or untruthful; that it is also employed to mean a disagreement between an audience and a reporter over what in fact is the truth about an event; and finally, that it may mean selectivity in reporting details about an event that may emphasize a point

of view unduly, or may elect to report or not to report particular stories altogether when customary practice would dictate otherwise. Only the last of these views of bias is useful for systematic investigation.

IV. Possibilities for the Occurrence of Bias in News Reporting

Bias as a Function of Media Constraint

The amount of bias in news content is an inverse function of the constraints against bias in a medium. Some constraints against bias are peculiar to television news and others are more general. The constraints include human values and motives. Several specific constraints on freedom to be biased are apparent. Media constraints also form the basis for a notion of "structural bias," which is introduced in this section.

The greater the number of people who hold diverse viewpoints and who participate in the production of news, the less likely bias can intrude in news unchecked. Thus, the complex filming, editing, script writing and other processes that television news stories confront limit the amount of bias that might exist. The average television story is probably processed by more different people than are stories in other media. Television news (excluding commentaries) would therefore be assumed to be less biased than news from, say, the Associated Press wire, other things equal.

Media are also subject to different kinds of built-in biases that relate more directly to the character of the specific medium than to the substance of coverage. Selectivity is due to the nature of the medium. Clearly such "structural biases" affect coverage. But they are not totally encapsuled by substantive considerations. The degree of control that news producers, editors, script

writers, and correspondents can exert over structural biases is more limited than is the potential control they can exert over the substance of news coverage. Structural biases are based on characteristics of the medium, not characteristics of news personnel (Weaver, 1972: 73).

Television is a live and active medium that has the capability to portray scenes as if the viewer were observing the same action that the reporter is observing (Stephenson, 1967; Schwartz, 1973). Radio can present live voices and other sounds as if they were live. Color pictures can be presented by magazines, some newspapers and television. Finally, newspapers and magazines can explore news stories in greater depth than other media. Both television and radio news programming find comparable depth in coverage prohibitively expensive.

Of all the news media, television has the highest overall level of credibility for the public. Americans report information from television as being more believable than information from other sources. Credibility of television programming (very important to the dynamics of attitude change) is doubtlessly due to the fact that both verbal description and action are observed simultaneously by respondents (Roper, 1969). Mass audiences are not highly cognizant of editorial processes, and of the differences that variations in editing--particularly of film editing--can make in the way a scene appears. Any event can be photographed in as many ways as the accompanying story can be verbally described. Yet audiences tend to react differently to pictures than to text when presented independently of pictures. Audiences react differently to each of the news media because of these kinds of structural characteristics.

The social and legal incentive structures of journalism and commercial television news provide yet further constraints of freedom to bias news reporting. It is likely, for instance, that television news programming which emphasizes appeals to viewer interest and excitement stresses some kinds of political positions

more than others. A pervasive reformist orientation for instance, may be corrosive to the development of intricate and delicate foreign policies (Epstein, 1975: 210-232). Once established, a prevailing tone of criticism may not do full justice to policy proposals initiated by those who have been most severely criticized (White, 1973). In short, attacks that are systematically directed at a government or political group tend to assume a momentum of their own and may require further attack even under conditions and for reasons that are far different from those which initially instigated the criticism. And yet popular expectations and journalists' norms may define some news as requiring a more (or less) critical stance than it otherwise would be due (Baily and Lichty, 1972).

Journalistic and Political Incentives

Weaver (1972: 69-73) developed a model concerning journalists' perceptions that he argues accounts for much contemporary press behavior in reporting political news. The model appears both reasonable and plausible. It assumes that journalists see politics as a game in which the stakes are personal gain and power. The game is competitive, and the electorate bestows victory and defeat on winners and losers through elections. Basic values are involved in the game, but their expression by politicians is directed at manipulating the electorate for purposes of personal gain. Indeed, political behavior in general is viewed as being directed largely at manipulative goals to further personal careers.

The journalist perceives his role in politics as being the bearer of the truth to the public, according to the model. His role involves publicizing candidates, their stands on issues and parties in a critical way. It means that the journalist should continuously expose the "hypocrisy" involved in attempts to manipulate popular sentiments.

News reporting that is highly critical of politics, politicians and electioneering results from the model of journalist perceptions, values and beliefs that Weaver outlined. In other words, we would expect to find more stories that are critical than are laudatory in political reporting. There does not, however, necessarily appear to be a strong basis for arguing that one candidate rather than another should receive preferential treatment from the media. The chief danger that the model implies concerning questions of bias appears to be in considerations of relevance and not in questions of balance and impartiality.

Structural Incentives

Incentives for news to favor certain kinds of news content and style in programming characterize network programming. In an important study of NBC news, Epstein (1973: 258-266) argued that "organizational imperatives" that are generated by the commercial nature of network programming shape the "pictures of society" that exist on the networks in large part. Timing, length, content and style are all based on considerations of budget, audience flow, legal considerations and clearances.

Networks must make a profit or at least break even on news programming. It is necessary to hold audiences that have been viewing prior programs through the news period. Revenue for the news, as well as for programs that immediately follow the news, is based on ratings in the same way that advertising revenue for other programming is based on program ratings. Legal implications of the Fairness Doctrine (inclusion of more than one side of at least some controversial material), moreover, must be taken into account at the same time that clearance is achieved (permitting network news to be broadcast over local affiliated stations by managers and owners) for the news. Without local station clearance,

ratings diminish as the size of the national audience diminishes. As ratings drop, advertising revenue is lost and news programming runs increased deficits.

Epstein argued that audience considerations lead to a restricted set of topics and styles of news presentation. Stories about recognizable objects that include conflict and portray high levels of action and drama are over-represented in the process. Less "interesting" stories are underrepresented (261-263).

This orientation of news production is reinforced, in turn, by rewarding reporters, directors, and producers who can deliver stories that consistently fit within the above demands: a demand for stories that are dramatic, yet unoffensive to most viewers; interesting enough to hold audiences yet timeless enough to be current even though delayed; action and conflict laden enough to be exciting, yet fall within the bounds of the Fairness Doctrine; and highly critical of existing institutions and practices yet perceived to be in good taste by most viewers.

The structural incentives or organization imperatives, audience maintenance and career aspirations of media personnel all contribute to selectivity in the reporting of political events. The incentives require presentation of certain news stories in certain ways, while limiting coverage of others. At least one criterion for selecting news stories that is influenced by structural incentives is "newsworthiness." In order to be covered, a political event must be more newsworthy than other political events that occur at roughly the same time. Suppose, for example, that the President of the United States makes a major policy speech outlining foreign policy goals while at the same time a candidate for the presidency is making a routine campaign speech before a national organization at another location in the same city. There can be little doubt

which story would be carried if a network had but one camera crew to assign to coverage of a news story. The President's actions affect the citizens of the United States as well as many foreign countries; his statements have effects which are more immediate and profound that most other political actors; a policy statement by a President is not a commonplace occurrence; and a policy statement usually engenders colorful responses from the proponents and of the President's policy position. The speech of a presidential candidate, although important in its own right, is less newsworthy than that of the President. The effects of the candidate are less far-reaching, less profound, more commonplace, and are not as likely to elicit colorful supporting and dissenting responses. And, as a final consideration, more people are attracted by coverage of a President than by coverage of a contender. Had the President's speech not been given, then the presidential candidate's speech might have been reported (May and Fraser, 1973).

Selectivity resulting from the newsworthiness of a political event is important in understanding the entire question of bias. First, selectivity must be included as the most common basis for bias. Second, bias due to judgments of newsworthiness is, for the most part, an objective criterion for reporting or failing to report a particular political event. Newsworthiness is not based on partisan motivation or arbitrariness on the part of media personnel. Third, if the media were to violate criteria of newsworthiness, they would soon lose viewers, listeners or readers, since their audiences are not interested in learning about relatively unimportant, undramatic, or colorless events.

Bias as a Negative Value

Regardless of the model of journalists' perceptions and regardless of methodological problems inherent in analyses of news media reporting, the question of bias has been repeatedly debated for a number of reasons. Biased reporting came to have extremely negative connotations during the 20th century. The notion of professionalism in schools of journalism came to stress norms that disavowed explicit partisanship by media in straight news coverage. Even more recently, however, adversary notions held by some journalists may be challenging views of other journalists who believe that reporting ought to be "objective" in nature. Yet, "objective" reporting is still lauded by most journalists and is certainly lauded by wide sectors of the public (Cusack, 1963).

The Fairness Doctrine and the Equal Time provision (that is, Section 315 of the Federal Communication Act of 1934, see Mullally, 1969-1970; and Sandman et al., 1972: 198-202) sensitized television personnel and interest groups in the general public to problems of bias in news programming (Sandman et al., 1972: 198-200). This occurred even though equal time provisions do not apply to news programming, and the Fairness Doctrine fails to stipulate that more than one side of at least some controversial issues should be presented. Furthermore, the probability that a station will actually lose its license due to violations of the Fairness Doctrine concerning news broadcasting is slight, although perceptions of political pressure by network officials may be real and may have extreme consequences (Friendly, 1967). Popular discussions of bias, as we have outlined above, include considerably more than what either the Fairness Doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission or Section 315 of the Federal Communications Act are designed to implement.

V. The Question of Evidence

Having opted for the notion of "bias as selectivity" as the most useful view of bias in the reporting of political events, what kinds of evidence can we count as exemplifying biased or unbiased news reporting? and how is this evidence to be interpreted and analyzed? Or, is it likely that bias is simply not useful in systematic analysis?

Two Types of Selectivity

An initial evidential concern involves the comparison of the reporting about political events and candidates within and among the media. Types of bias that might be inferred are presented in Figure 1. These types of bias may be distinguished as follows. Consider first a situation in which different media report a political event differently, although each member of a medium reports the event in identical ways. NBC, ABC, and CBS evening news programs, for example, might report a political event in identical ways, while several radio stations might also report the event in identical ways. But the TV and radio accounts might differ substantially. This situation would provide at least some evidence that "structural bias" was present in the reporting.

A second situation involves members of the same medium reporting a political event in different ways. CBS and NBC news, for instance, each reports, an event one way, but ABC news reports the same event another way. This situation would provide at least some evidence that "political bias" was present. But although one can conclude that political bias might be present, in this case, it is not possible to specify <u>which</u> member is presenting biased coverage without a great deal of additional evidence. Two networks which report in identical ways might in fact be biased, while the third network might be unbiased. It is also possible, of course, that all three are biased in different ways.

Figure 1. Types of Bias

		MEDIA: different medium	MEDIA: same medium
POLITICAL EVENT: different reporting		structural bias	political bias
POLITICAL EVENT: identical reporting		bias indeterminant	bias indeterminant

Two additional situations in which a political event is reported in the same way by all the members of a single medium or by all the members of different media are also presented in Figure 1. All three television networks, many radio stations and a large number of newspapers report some event in an identical fashion. There is no way to judge whether or not bias is present using the view of bias as selectivity. All or none of the accounts may include bias. As a consequence, these situations are "indeterminant" with respect to the evaluation of bias.

When we speak of the kinds of evidence on which a case for bias might be based, we speak of observations that include within medium variation, between media variation and variation in reporting. These observations provide necessary but not sufficient conditions to provide evidence for bias. Generally, some

form of bias might be assumed if any one of these aspects is found in an analysis. The best case for establishing partisan bias in news media exists when all three situations are found.

Some Possibilities for Measurement

A second concern is how one goes about measuring either structural or political bias. One way involves attempts to measure bias using more than one indicator for the concept. Bias is "derivative" in the sense that it is based on inferences drawn from measures of other concepts. Typically, attributes of some relevant unit of analysis--program, story, article, paragraph, sentence, or theme--are measured. The pattern of attributes is then inspected. Bias is assumed to be present only if certain patterns are apparent. Bias is asserted to exist, for instance, if news stories are more favorable to Nixon than McGovern, more unfavorable to the military than favorable to it, or if more attention is devoted to some aspects of a topic than to other aspects of it.

Yet specific measures may not be applicable in all cases. Any single measure has errors of specific kinds associated with it. Thus, a more accurate picture of a very complex problem should result from comparing the way political events are treated on a number of different measures of the same concept than would be true if a single measure were used (Campbell and Fiske, 1959).

Another measurement strategy involves attempts to measure the same concept by using different methods of judgment (within the overall content analysis approach, broadly construed) for similar reasons. The assumption that underlies this approach is that each method is flawed in some way, and that each method has certain biases associated with it. It is assumed that the errors that are linked to each method will allow conclusions that are more accurate than conclusions based on a single method of measurement (Campbell and Fiske, 1959).

Consider the following three measurement methods that might be used to evaluate a favorableness dimension in a television news story about some issue. First, judgments (of the kind mentioned above) might be based on observation of both the text and sound track of entire news stories. These judgments would be holistic in orientation and based on clearly defined coding conventions. The conventions that underlay such an approach would have relatively low levels of ambiguity. Second, a set of rating scales might be assigned to the presentation of the news story. The measure would comprise judgments based on holistic criteria, but the criteria would be considerably more ambiguous than those employed in the preceding example. Coding would be based on a coder's "educated reaction" to the mode and content of presentation. Third, individual themes might be counted in the text of the news story, classified by a set of unambiguous conventions and then totaled to represent a final "thematic score" for the way that specific concerns were presented in the story.

Each of these methods provides a set of indicators for the way a topic was treated in a story. Each has obvious weaknesses and biases. The first construes the meaning of favorableness narrowly. It might therefore have a low level of validity. The second uses criteria that are ambiguous. It might suffer from reliability or accuracy problems. The third combines individual themes in an additive manner when themes might be combined more appropriately in other ways. The third measure might be of questionable validity. But when all three kinds of measures are considered together, the strengths of each method complement the weaknesses of the others.

These measurement possibilities illustrate some of the important considerations which must be accounted for in evaluating the occurrence of bias in news reporting. The ways in which alternative measurement possibilities are formulated

in an analysis of news reporting determine to a large extent the quality of the evidence which may be marshalled to support conclusions about the presence or absence of bias. Any serious effort to ground notions of news bias empirically requires a multi-measure, multi-method attack on measurement problems.

Assessing the Degree of Bias

A third evidential concern involves the problem of specifying the extent to which reporting of political events is biased or unbiased. For example, is there any way to discern whether one network is twice as biased as another network in the reporting of a particular event? In an extreme case when two networks report an event in one way and a third reports it in another, it might be impossible to indicate which are biased, much less the extent to which they are biased. Therefore, it will not always be possible to indicate anything other than the occurrence of bias without specifying either the guilty agents or the extent of their guilt.

But all instances of bias in reporting may be viewed as extreme cases. Structural bias may be the easiest to identify in an analysis since it involves a comparison among different kinds of media. Political bias may be more difficult to identify because it is discernable only in the analysis of a particular medium. If it were possible to specify instances of structural and political bias, it might be impossible in some cases to determine the extent to which one coverage of an event is more or less biased than the coverage of another. The problem results from an inability to establish an absolute baseline according to which instances of bias may be evaluated. Lefever (1974), for instance, failed to establish a baseline in his study of CBS coverage of the American military establishment in an otherwise interesting study.

The absence of a metric is basic to the problem. One network might be more biased than another in its news coverage, but no metric of bias is available to say exactly how much bias the differences in coverage represent. One network might far exceed others in biased coverage, while the existence of bias among all networks was low. Since bias allows only for ordinal comparisons of news reporting, evidence used to support assertions must be viewed by a perspective which is comparative or categorical but not cardinal.

Three Dimensions of Bias

A fourth evidential concern involves the analysis of bias as selectivity for three important dimensions contained in the questions: how long a period of time should be analyzed to properly identify bias? How many instances of coverage are required? And, in the coverage of people, events and issues, are there levels of importance or significance which should be accounted for?

The first question can be answered by assuming that the most meaningful measure of bias in news reporting is to be gleened from an analysis of content during an extended period of time. Extensiveness in this context does not refer to an absolute period of time, but is instead relative. Analysis during an extended period of time is necessary, since it is not clear what one can conclude by identifying several instances of bias during only a short time. On the one hand, instances of bias may represent singular occurrences which are neither representative of news reporting prior to or following an analysis of news coverage. At best, one can conclude that bias was discovered during a certain time period. On the other hand, instances of bias may represent a pattern of biased reporting which is consistent during extended time periods and is related consistently to important people, events and issues.

In these situations, conclusions about bias are more meaningful because they represent more extensive content in news reporting. The two extremes, the single instance and instances analyzed during lengthy periods of time, are best viewed as endpoints on a continuum of possibilities.

We may also assert that, in general, the best evidence for bias should be based on more cases rather than fewer. A few isolated cases allow generalization of suspect stability and representativeness if the events reported occur on a more than episodic basis. Questions must be posed. For example, how representative of all possible periods was the particular time period selected for analysis?

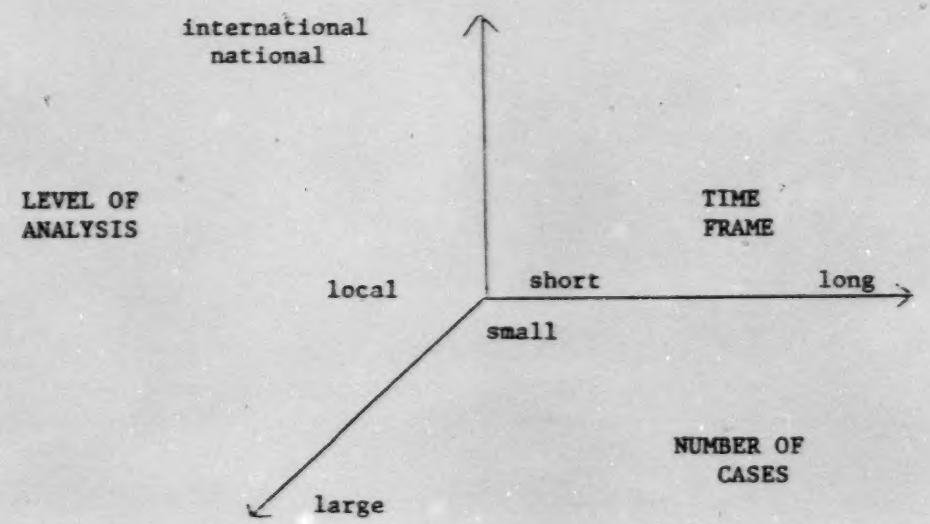
In some analyses, it is easier to gather a sufficient number of cases than in others. Since there are only three national television networks and a very limited number of stories on each, for example, the variety of cases necessary to analyze bias would be much more limited than an analysis of equivalent reporting in nationally circulated newspapers. Again, the "more-rather-than-less" criterion seems to present a reasonable working rule.

The third question can be answered by suggesting that news coverage of people, events, and issues varies in its importance and effects among different levels of analysis, ranging from local to national to international coverage. On the local level, bias in coverage of political events may affect only those in the immediate community. But the effects of bias become increasingly significant for the entire society as the level of analysis encompasses larger units. At the national or international level, biased coverage of a political event may be both significant and far-ranging in its effects for entire societies. This comparison might be illustrated by considering the potential effects of biased coverage about local tax issues in comparison

to the effects of biased coverage of the Vietnam war. News coverage of both might be biased. But even though both might have a significant effect on those in a community, consequences for the role of citizens would also differ. Thus, analyses of biased news coverage are generally assumed to be most significant and conclusive when dealing with news reporting examined during extended periods of time, involving a large number of cases and concerning topics of national or international interest.

In summary, concern with appraising evidence about bias inovlves the selection of an approach which can capture the complexity and subtlety of: 1) appropriate comparisons and contrasts in media reports of events, 2) explicitly defining measures, 3) understanding bias in a relative rather than absolute sense, and 4) length of time during which media are evaluated. This requires

Figure 2. Dimensions of Bias



extensive and accurate observations of actual news reports, and elaborate controls for reliability and validity of measures. It also requires procedures which insure that minimal amounts of error are introduced. But most of all, it requires a rigorous presentation of design, research, and results so that criticism of the entire analysis will be facilitated. If the analysis of bias as selectivity is not subject to the restrictions set out above (but is instead approached as a polemic), then no approach will provide a basis for accurately assessing and evaluating news content. Under these conditions, bias becomes just one more concept in the purview of the practice of politics rather than in its study.

VI. Some Implications and Consequences

We have argued above that commonsensical notions of bias are of little value since they either cannot be measured systematically or they occur only rarely or episodically. An alternative, albeit not a completely satisfactory alternative, to these commonsensical notions which purport to overcome these difficulties was given as bias as selectivity. Two forms of bias appear in news reporting: 1) structural bias, which is bias arising from the particular characteristics of a medium; and 2) political bias, which is bias in selecting facts in an unequitable or unfair fashion. Each of these kinds of bias was shown to require rigorous kinds of evidence to be minimally useful in systematic research. But major problems in disentangling the two kinds of bias may remain, despite the care taken in research. Assuming that the notion of bias based on selectivity is more useful than other views of bias, what are some of the consequences of this view for understanding the media and American politics?

In order to answer this question, three important problems areas may be considered. First, can the news media be effectively monitored for bias by

individuals, organizations, or governmental agencies which are external to the media? Second, what are some of the effects attributable to structural and political bias and how effective is internal self-regulation by elements in the news media in order to eliminate structural and political bias? Third, what is the nature of opinion formation in mass publics that is related to bias?

Monitoring Bias in the News Media

News media can be monitored at several levels. Individuals, for instance, act as monitors as they receive and evaluate information disseminated by the news media. If citizens desire to monitor the media in other than a casual, unsystematic way, however, then they must be concerned with establishing an extensive time frame, adequate number of cases and several levels of analysis. These, in turn, must be evaluated according to an explicit set of rules and standards. Unfortunately, costs of such an analysis are likely to be exorbitant, and to be perceived as exceeding benefits. Casual monitoring of the news meida will in most cases be likely to result in identifying isolated instances of bias in news reporting. Most citizens must rely upon other sources for information about bias in news reporting.

One source to which the individual might turn for an evaluation of bias in news reporting is private or public organizations equipped to research the news media effectively. Even though an organization is able to surmount the effects of cost in conducting research on bias, it may still be subject to several problems in assessing bias in news reporting. One problem concerns the nature of the evidence to be employed. Bias, it will be recalled, is indeterminant when different media all report a political event in an identical fashion and when elements of the media all report an event in an identical fashion with the benefit of comparison among different media. As a result of

indeterminance, it may be impossible to discern whether biased reporting is structural or political. But it may also be impossible to identify bias regardless of its structural or political aspects.

Another problem concerns those possibilities which are not indeterminant, and instances in which time, number of cases, and levels of analysis can be effectively built into a research design. Just how useful are conclusions, if they can be drawn? Our view of bias requires a substantial delay in evaluating news reporting. The analysis, moreover, must be post hoc if it is to make any sense holistically. Thus, identification of bias may occur too late to be useful in policy analysis or policy implementation, regardless of whatever other value findings hold for policy-makers.

Public agencies--most notably the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)--regulate news content to some extent, but have not confronted problems of structural bias in a serious way. The regulatory agencies have traditionally been constrained by first amendment guarantees. Indeed, FCC guidelines themselves contribute to the structure of incentives that sustain some forms of bias in public affairs coverage. The Fairness Doctrine, for instance, requires mention of more than one view concerning issues. Depth in coverage may be sacrificed by giving several groups time or space with regard to some issue. This coverage may replace more extensive analysis. The resulting superficial character of coverage includes less information than coverage in greater depth, even if the deeper coverage were less balanced. It is also likely that certain issues favor one candidate at the expense of another. Coverage of single rather than multiple aspects of issues (to allow time or space to review each candidate's views briefly) may result in grossly unfair coverage for some of the candidates.

As long as the media--especially the news media--continue to be perceived by governmental regulatory agencies and corporate officials as they have been (Friendly, 1967), the full implications of structural bias in public affairs programming will not be fully appreciated. Corporate executives are, in large part, concerned with program ratings and revenues (Epstein, 1973); public regulators are, in large part concerned with monitoring and constraining the more readily obvious forms of political bias. Both groups are probably more concerned with problems other than partisan bias in public affairs programming. It is unlikely that these concerns overlap sufficiently to encourage regulation of structural biases that have partisan implications.

The Problem of Structural Bias

Structural bias may be a necessary consequence of the institutional organization of broadcasting and newspapers, and it may be relatively innocuous in its effects. Varieties of structural bias, such as some aspects of judgments concerning newsworthiness, can be identified clearly in most news reporting. But structural bias is based on peculiarities of a specific medium which arise solely as a function of the medium; each medium is characterized by certain aspects which cannot be divorced from the medium's physical and operating presence. Since structural bias is identifiable and common in news reporting and characterizes each type of medium, it is possible to set up objective standards of evaluation, the criterion of newsworthiness being but one example. Any news report either conforms to the standards (all similar news stories are treated the same way according to the standard), or not. If a story conforms to the standards, then bias is structural; if the story does not, bias is political. Because the standards are objective, equal

application to news reporting about all political evens must be fair since the standards affect all reported stories of the same kind in similar ways.

First, the argument hinges on the capacity to make standards for judging structural bias explicit. But this task is difficult at best. One might consider the criterion of newsworthiness as a starting point, since ideas of newsworthiness include such structural aspects as relevance, importance, timeliness, and others.

Consider the following situation involving newsworthiness. The President makes a speech defending a policy position relating to the emerging nations. The Premier of the U.S.S.R. also makes a speech on the emerging nations criticizing the U.S. policy position. Three countries report the speeches: the U.S. press carries the President's speech live on television, but only summarizes the Premier's speech; the Soviet press carries the Premier's speech live on television and summarizes the President's speech; and the press of an emerging nation summarizes both speeches, but carries neither one live on television. Assume that the news reports all fulfill some criteria of newsworthiness for the particular country in which they were reported.

Is the reporting of the speeches objective? Perhaps not. First, it makes a difference whether or not a speech is reported live and visually, or reported second-hand and verbally. Differences in reporting probably lead to different interpretations by viewers. "Seeing is believing" contributes to enhanced credibility of live prsentations. Emphases, idiosyncracies of delivery, and asides are rarely included in news summaries. Nor do statements out of context have the same impact as statements in the context of live presentations.

On the basis of an interest criterion, it would appear that it is more newsworthy for Americans to view the President live, the Russians to view the Premier live and the third world to hear summaries of each. Popular interest

in the Soviet speech, lingual problems aside, make it less newsworthy for an American audience. It appears that the apparent objectivity that inheres in notions of structural bias is not as clear as had been presumed. In large part, criteria that define structural bias are based on norms which dictate kinds of news coverage and not necessarily a clearly defined set of objective standards.

Structural bias may appear to be definable in objective terms because one lacks a systematic basis for comparison between potential standards of interpretation. If there are many standards of interpretation which relate to the same medium, then views which suggest that structural bias is a rigid, immutable by-product of a medium are incorrect; it is instead flexible and changeable.

It is also necessary to scrutinize the argument that structural bias is negligible or innocuous in effect. A close examination of some of the by-products of structural bias shows that this argument is probably incorrect. Instead of a proliferation of negligible, innocuous side effects, structural bias may have a variety of consequences.

First, we have assumed that important news stories (news stories which are more important than other stories) take precedence in news reporting, and that the precedence of important over unimportant is even more pronounced in the case of the electronic media, since time and length of a story are crucial factors. Stories are judged to be important in terms of relevance, timeliness, significance, etc. Another way in which a story becomes important is by mentioning it over and over again at the expense of other news stories. An example of the first criterion of importance would be the initial reporting of the Watergate burglary. An example of the second would be the repeated

reporting of some minor aspects of Watergate-related materials even though other news items might have been more important at the time. News reporting sometimes develops themes concerning issues that tend to be self-perpetuating and are reported over and over again.

The potential effects of the second situation are much greater than those of the first as far as bias is concerned. Repetitive reporting involves the self-perpetuation of news stories and the manipulation of their perceived importance vis-a-vis less frequently mentioned stories. News stories once mentioned tend to gather a momentum of their own; the effect of the momentum is to exclude or diminish the significance of other stories. If news stories are reported as a consequence of gathering momentum and not as a consequence of relative importance in comparison to other news stories, then the potential effects of structural bias are neither innocuous nor negligible. Massive manipulations of popular perceptions and attributions of issue salience may be involved, even if the impact of these processes is difficult to discern during any particular short time period.

Second, broadcasting a news story affects the quality and quantity of information received by an audience. A news story may describe all of the alternatives related to a public policy which are available and the alternative selected by decision-makers, or a story may report only the chosen alternative while excluding mention of the other possibilities. Selection at each stage of reporting determines the kind of information available to the public. The reporting of certain information in a news story also manifests another aspect of bias. Reporting of a specific policy may tend to "legitimize" the policy in the public's eye; failing to report a policy might make it suspect in the public's eye. Thus, some policies may become "legitimized" not because of intrinsic merit, but because of the amount of news coverage that they receive. Few would view this outcome as innocuousness.

Third, politicians and the news media often confront one another. Politicians frequently claim that the media are basically negative in coverage of political events. The news media, in contrast, assert that the media should be watchdogs over political events and actors. The news media are the ones that present balanced coverage, and examine all sides of the question reporting sham, buffoonery, misfeasance and malfeasance whenever it exists.

The nature of conflict between media and politicians can be explained using notions of structural bias. News media require that criticism be used in coverage of political events and actions. The need for a critical stance arises from the premises of the journalistic model. Politicians are concerned with making, implementing and evaluating policies, and they are concerned with keeping or enhancing their own political positions. Newsmen are concerned with one set of premises, while politicians are concerned with an entirely different set. Thus, both camps will be at odds with one another not necessarily because they disagree about the issues involved, but because they argue from different sets of premises. This situation, then, lends an air of negativism in evaluating both positions, even though a negativistic air is the intent of neither camp. Structural bias has led the media away from one of its own premises, that of relevance. A mandate for watching over the activities of politicians may exist, but the repeated reporting of critical evaluations, especially at the expense of more descriptive reporting, may also be irrelevant as far as the public's understanding of an event is concerned. Consequently, the public may come to be hostile to policies, for example, but have little or no information about these policies or about alternatives to them that is helpful in making reasoned, critical evaluations.

Fourth, the use of different premises may set the media and politicans at odds with each other. Structural bias may in yet other cases create a kind of partnership between the media and the politicians in the following way. Structural peculiarities in a medium may require that news stories conform to a limited number of patterns. In television, for example, good camera angles are preferred to bad, action film footage is preferred to location shots, images are preferred to verbage, etc. News stories which are congruent with these factors are more reportable than those which do not conform. The less preferred are either ignored entirely or given very little attention in reporting.

Politicians who are aware of what is likely to be reported can use the principles to great advantage. The hoopla and staging of events in campaigning, for example, fits the mold of what is judged to be newsworthy (in an exciting, action-filled, easily accessable manner). Apt campaign managers are able to exploit fully the structural biases of particular media. Politicians also produce their own news releases. These may include exciting film footage, and interesting and important verbage all designed for timely presentation through the news media. Clearly, the "help" that is contributed by politicians facilitates the media in news reporting. It is only natural that a kind of harmonious relationship develops between media personnel and politicians (Crouse, 1972).

The harmony between news personnel and news makers raises several questions concerning the impact of structural bias on the character of information that is broadcast: 1) balance and relevance in news reporting may be eliminated in favor of expediency and action; 2) news may become strictly the creation of technical experts who can provide what the medium requires, rather

than the joint production of many persons with a variety of viewpoints that go beyond non-news considerations; and 3) expediency and action, along with requirements of technology may make the news a province of those who have the resources or the experience to produce the story. Other, possibly more critical, stories may be crowded out.

The question of how effective media self-regulation of biases is likely to be must be broached. First, not all aspects of structural bias are immutable characteristics of a medium, based upon prevailing conventions or norms. Second, structural bias is neither negligible nor innocuous in effect, but instead can manifest both unfair and socially undesirable consequences in a society in which the dissemination of information is as critical to self-government as it is in the United States. Third, even though we have argued against the substantial occurrence of political bias, structural bias is assumed to be much more common than political bias and to pose a significant threat to the adequacy of popular information about public policy. Internal self-regulation of political and structural bias may be "ineffective." But even worse, self-regulation may encourage the media and the newsmakers to further exploit structural peculiarities of the media in pursuit of profit and at the expense of more informative coverage. The politics of studying the impact of televised violence on children provides one example of how the process might be played out (Liebert, et al., 1973: 111-171).

Even though characteristics of structural bias seem to negate effective measures for internal self-regulation, it appears that identifying aspects of structural bias may provide guidelines for ameliorating its effects. If medium characteristics are not as immutable as is implied by some arguments, then it should be possible to manipulte structural bias by reexamining these conventions and norms, and then by changing them.

Attitude Theory and Bias as Selectivity

News reporting by the mass media constitutes a major source of information which may affect attitude formation and change in mass publics. Although there are a variety of theoretical approaches which purport to explain this phenomenon in many diametrically opposed ways, most of these attitudinal theories tend to agree upon the following views.

First, attitudes--the ideas, beliefs, values, and affection--one has about political and social events tend to cluster together so that structures of attitudes about common events are formed. These attitudes are organized around other attitudes that have high centrality for the individual (Converse, 1964; Kessel, 1972). That is, the central attitudes in the structure concern objects that one tends to think about a great deal and also may assume a high level of importance for the individual. "Good" Democrats and "good" Republicans for example, not only maintain high levels of affectation for their parties, but they also hold appropriate beliefs about the New Deal, party and opposition candidates and advocate values that support party views.

Second, attitudes that occur in clusters (that have a relatively high degree of structuring) gather support from other attitudes to which they are connected. In highly integrated structures of attitudes, a great deal of support exists for each of the individual attitudes. The fact one identifies with the Democrats, for instance, is supported by and also provides support for the idea that Democrats are somehow superior to Republicans and most Republican candidates. The susceptibility of an attitude to change due to new information is related to the extent to which clusters in which the attitude is located are well integrated. In general, the greater the degree of integration, the less the susceptibility to change. Attitudes that exist

outside structures altogether are, consequently, highly susceptible to change (Converse, 1962).

Third, some attitudes tend to be more central within attitude structures than other attitudes. Susceptibility to change is also related to attitude centrality. The greater the centrality of an attitude in a structure of attitudes, the less susceptible the attitude is to change (Converse, 1964: 206-261).

Fourth, attitudes tend to become integrated into structures of attitudes and to thereby become more central the longer that the attitudes are held. Attitudes do not float freely about in peoples' minds. Rather attitudes tend to seek support, and support eminates from attitudinal structures. Thus, newer, more recently formed attitudes tend to be more susceptible to change than do older attitudes which are more likely to be well-established. This is one reason why youth are more volatile in their political behavior and less apt to identify with political parties than are their elders (Campbell, et al., 1960).

Fifth, information would be expected to have a great deal of impact in the formation of new attitudes on subjects of fairly high concern to an individual (Converse, 1962: 578-599; and Dreyer, 1971-1972: 544-553). New information about a central issue would be sought eagerly and, most likely, accepted readily with very little question. No opposition would exist if thought had not been previously given to the topic.

Sixth, information is increasingly potent in creating and changing attitudes to the extent that the source of the information is credible (Weiss, 1969; Sears and Whitney, 1973). Credibility refers, quite simply, to the extent to which people are willing to believe a source. The more believable the source, the more influence he has in changing attitudes.

Given these generalizations about the dynamics of attitude change and the ways in which we suggested that learning from the media, particularly television, occurs, we would expect that the news will be particularly important in shaping views about newsevents, or about events that have a relatively low salience and little centrality to the individual, but which, for one reason or another, are salient enough to motivate individuals to pay attention to information about the event. In part, this process is similar to the dynamics of agenda setting. Events are attributed a new salience and centrality because of information being reported by the news media.

It is also important to consider that a news story, ostensibly supplying the same information to all, may stimulate very different thought processes for individuals who are sensitized to politics and to political events in different ways (Converse, 1962). Highly politicized and partisan individuals will react to a story about former candidate George McGovern and former President Nixon in very different ways than will people who are only mildly interested in politics. Similarly, strong supporters of former President Nixon may come to damn exposure of Watergate hearings as being anti-Nixon, while strong detractors of former President Nixon may regard exposure of the hearings as an attempt to cover up information.

Contrary interpretation of identical information is a very likely occurrence among the highly politicized. But politicization to this degree is not common among a majority of the American electorate (Converse, 1964). Much more likely is a bland reaction to information that eminates from television news. Passive, rather than active, learning is much more common. It is images and vague, fairly amorphous ideas that are communicated and not material that provokes high levels of excitation among most people. This suggests that

care must be taken not to "over-interpret" the popular partisan significance of news stories. The relationship between manifest content of news stories and popular reaction to it is an empirical question and doubtlessly one of great complexity.

Even more important, the news media "fill in" information in existing attitude structures because the media provides new information about topics that are already encompassed by attitudinal structures. Information gradually builds up in a structure. Images, often emphasizing values and emotions, are affected by this incremental growth. Finally, a transformation of the attitude structure itself evolves. The appropriate analogy for understanding attitude change as it relates to the media and politics is not the conversion effect. Change is slow and imperceptible, not dramatic and emotive (Nimmo, 1970).

Changes of the incremental type are, of course, much less noticeable and much more common than the creation of new attitudes. Incremental change is more likely to be a consequence of passive learning, while formation of new attitudes due to exposure to the news media is more likely to be a consequence of active learning.

The effects of bias as selectivity upon attitudes is probably best represented as a continuum ranging from least effective to most effective. From the previous discussion of attitude theory, biased information, either old or new, has the last effect when incoming information disseminated by the media is incorporated into an attitude structure of high centrality, clustering, and salience, but low motivation and credibility (Blumler and McQuail, 1969). Biased information has the greatest effect when an attitude structure is of low centrality, clustering and salience, but high motivation and credibility.

It is important to note that this description of the attitude structures is assumed as a "given" when assessing the effects of bias. Within the context of a given attitude structure, both biased and other kinds of information will be most effective in changing attitudes under some conditions (Weiss, 1969; Manheim, 1975; Nimmo, 1970; Katz and Feldman, 1962). Unfortunately, attitude structures are seldom if ever revealed in this fashion. Instead, attitude structures that are related to information processing and effect are: 1) unique for each individual; 2) subjective for each individual in those structures which are highly similar and which may process and convert information in highly divergent ways; 3) partially subliminal in the sense that information may be processed and converted in ways which are not manifestly identifiable or measurable; and 4) highly dynamic in at least two ways: a) the information being processed is constantly changing, and b) the structure and process itself may be constantly in a state of flux (Nimmo, 1974; Schwartz, 1973; Edelman, 1964).

Properties of attitude structures are important considerations in the study of bias since they suggest that: 1) the effects of biased information on mass publics is idiosyncratic with regard to each individual in the public; 2) in terms of being informative, the effects of a single message may range from bad through neutral to good for different individuals; 3) the effects not measurable given manifest content alone and are often not measurable given commonly employed survey techniques; 4) the effects can emerge at any time or at no time, thereby necessitating longitudinal studies in an analysis of the effects of bias; and 5) attempts at pooling data concerning the effects of bias for individuals may be more complex than it would appear at first glance. Complex interactions between content, exposure, motivation, and ideological viewpoints should be included in assessing the informational impact of mass media.

Problems in studying the effects of various forms of bias (or of information in general) on attitude formation and change portends one extremely interesting consequence for the study of bias in the news media's reporting of political events. Although it may be possible to identify and measure bias in news reporting in an objective fashion in some cases, it may not be possible to disentangle the forms of bias in a satisfactory way and it certainly is not a straightforward matter to suggest that the consequences of biased information are. The consequences may range from no effect to great effect, and from unfavorable effects to favorable effects. Analyses of news bias may be of greater usefulness from a policy perspective as social scientists better understand information processing. The comprehensiveness of present studies is far from conclusive in this regard.

VII. Concluding Comments

We began this analysis with the observation that polemically charged uses of the term "bias" in relation to news coverage confused more than enlightened most discussions. The confusion, moreover, lends a mystique to the nature of bias in news coverage that is inappropriate in a rigorous examination of the problem in contemporary society. Different views of bias that often are employed (bias in terms of lying, distortion, and disagreement with value premises) are not found to be very helpful in attacking problems in analyzing news content. If none of these views facilitates systematic research, what then are we to discern as evidence that news coverage is biased or unbiased?

An alternative view of bias (defined in more global terms of selectivity) was found to be a much more useful notion, because selectivity is amenable to systematic analysis. Unbalanced and inequitable or unfair coverage of events is biased in nature; balanced equitable or fair coverage of events

is unbiased. Two forms of bias were distinguished: 1) bias due to the characteristics of the media themselves (occasionally interacting with the environment), or structural bias; and 2) bias that reflected favorably or unfavorably on an event, group, or person, but had no necessary relationship to particular characteristics of single types of media, or political and social bias. The two kinds of bias are not always as neatly distinguished as the discussion may have indicated, for they need not be mutually exclusive. It was concluded that the impact of each kind of bias on media audiences, moreover, was at least partially a function of the psychological nature of each person in the audience. The effects of exposure to the mass media are mediated in part by what persons bring to the situation; this includes their beliefs, values, and motives.

Assessment of bias in news coverage of social events might be construed in terms of a large matrix. Assume that different kinds of media are arrayed along the rows of the matrix, and that different instances of the media are arrayed along the columns of the matrix. Television, for instance, might be construed as occupying the first row of the matrix, while each network (e.g., ABC, NBC, and CBS) would occupy a column in that row. Newspapers might occupy the second row of the matrix, while three specific papers (e.g., the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Chicago Tribune) would occupy three of the columns in the second row.

Characteristics of news--based on a variety of aspects--would be arrayed along a third dimension of the matrix. Structural biases would be inferred whenever, on a series of measures along the third dimension, similarities were found between columns in the matrix and consistent differences were found between rows in the matrix. Variation in media coverage would be attributable to the general type of medium in this case.

Political biases might be inferred whenever, on a series of measures on the third dimension, similarities were found between rows in the matrix and differences between columns. Political bias might be suspect, for instance, when differences appeared within coverage by media of the same kind, and similarities appeared within coverage by media of different kinds: variation in coverage could not be attributed to structural characteristics of the media. Variation in coverage must have been due to other factors. A necessary condition for the existence of partisan bias would have been discerned. At best, however, bias is "a slippery concept" (Wamsley and Pride, 1972: 450). It is important to note, therefore, that a necessary condition is not also a sufficient condition in the absence of additional, rather tenuous assumptions. Analysts of "biased news" would do well to emphasize the tenuousness of their conclusions.

But what might some of the measures along the third dimension be by which news coverage might be compared? A catalog of news and media characteristics should be developed to suit the goals of each analysis. A prototype of such a catalog might include the following: 1) organizational imperatives, such as timing, length, content, style, budget, legal considerations and local outlets; 2) audience maintenance, such as Nielson ratings in the case of television or circulation figures in the case of newspapers, programming or composition, and are popularly perceived as important, stories that are "newsworthy." These are the stories that would be broadcast, and among these, the stories that are likely to strike a "responsive chord" in much of the news audience. But, as noted, the specific effects of exposure to these factors would be some function of what each person in the audience for a story brings to the story himself and what he actually "sees" in the story. Thus, strong assertions concerning

the effects of various types of news coverage--political or non-political--on society should not be made in the absence of survey or experimental data that include measures of audience response in explicit ways. This, of course, includes assertions about "bias".

In pursuing an analysis of bias in news coverage, the analyst not only must take these considerations into account, but should also be sensitive to: 1) the use of numerous indicators for the measurement of each concept, since idiosyncratic variation in specific indicators (together with low frequencies of occurrence in stories) are common in news coverage in many specific events; 2) a relativist rather than an absolutist perspective in interpreting what is biased and what is not and how the bias is manifest, since absolute baselines for interpreting indications of bias are nearly never available to the analyst; 3) a longitudinal design with a focus on a variety of types of events so that a more holistic interpretation of coverage can be given and so that each medium's own prior coverage can be used as a baseline by which to evaluate later coverage of similar events; and 4) strict adherence to scientific method in terms of the rigor demanded of evidence and the caution required of conclusions that are either accusatory or vindicative in character. Shrill tones in much debate concerning news bias is a warning that due caution may not have been taken in arriving at conclusions.

But what should be done about bias beyond studying media coverage in attempts to discern its presence or absence? Probably very little. Individual citizens cannot usually bear the expense of rigorous scientific studies. Institutions may find that, by the time a study has been conducted, the issue has faded and is no longer of concern. And basic notions of civil liberties, especially first amendment liberties, are brought into question to the extent

that governmental agencies monitor media for the purpose of attempts to constrain them against biased coverage.

The best safeguard for the average citizen (or for most institutions in society) is to monitor public affairs reporting in a diverse set of news sources. The greater the variety of news sources and the greater the diversity of interests and concerns that are represented by these sources, the less the chances that a single medium, with its attendant biases, will constrain the citizen's information about public affairs. Variety of information is the key to avoiding basing action on biased coverage, whatever the source of the bias might be.

Governmental actions that stimulate a diversity of news sources appear to be the most effective policy to inhibit bias in news coverage in the context of a democratic society. The citizen, like the social scientist who is interested in the quality of news coverage, must be willing to evaluate multiple messages about a series of events from many sources in as systematic a way as possible in his quest for political knowledge.

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